

# Islam vs. Democracy

*Martin Kramer*

IN THE summer of 1881, the English poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt wrote a series of essays subsequently published under the title, *The Future of Islam*. Blunt was a high-born patron of the downtrodden, a policy intellectual of sorts who enlivened the drawing rooms of Victorian ministers and viceroys. He had also fallen under the spell of the forerunners of modern Islamic fundamentalism. In his book, Blunt argued that these thinkers had carried Islam to the brink of a great religious reformation. Under their inspiration, he wrote,

I committed myself without reserve to the Cause of Islam as essentially the "Cause of Good" over an immense portion of the world, and to be encouraged, not repressed, by all who cared for the welfare of mankind.

It fell upon England, as the world's greatest power, to "take Islam by the hand and encourage her boldly in the path of virtue."

More than a century later, a frantic quest for the "Cause of Good" in the Middle East and North Africa has again seized the West. In an era of democratization, these lands of Islam remain an anomaly—a zone of resistance to the ideals that have toppled authoritarian regimes of the Left and the Right. For several years now, political scientists and policy-makers, borne along by a tidal wave of research grants and federally-funded initiatives, have scanned the horizons of Islam for signs of democracy. In a plethora of academic papers and conferences, they have speculated on the reasons for the absence of democratic movements, and suggested what should be done to encourage their emergence. Suddenly, this past year, many of them reached a stunning conclusion: these movements have already appeared, in the guise of Islamic fundamentalism.

It has been a year of fervent Western testimonials. Islam, avers a noted journalist in *Foreign Affairs*, is now "at a juncture increasingly equated with the Protestant Reformation," due to the

growing number of fundamentalists who "are now trying to reconcile moral and religious tenets with modern life, political competition, and free markets." What these "supposed fanatics" really want, writes a leading political scientist in *Ethics and International Affairs*, is "the end of corrupt, arbitrary, and unpredictable rule and the imposition of the rule of law and responsible government." The new Islamic fundamentalism should be seen "for what it is," concludes a former intelligence analyst in the *Washington Post*,

a movement that is historically inevitable and politically "tamable." Over the long run it even represents ultimate political progress toward greater democracy and popular government.

These views now reverberate in the hearing rooms of Washington. The director of the CIA, Robert Gates, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February:

I'm not ready yet to concede that Islamic fundamentalism is, by its nature, anti-Western and anti-democratic. There are some fundamentalist elements in the region—they're not in power—that are not necessarily that way. And I think that it's also an evolution.

"I had made myself a romance about these reformers," Wilfrid Blunt confessed fifteen years after publication of *The Future of Islam*, "but it has no substantial basis." Blunt was not the first Westerner to be swept off his feet, then left bewildered, by the promise of Islamic revival. Since the Enlightenment broke the lock of medieval prejudice against Islam, the reform of Islam had been declared inevitable, even imminent, by a parade of visionaries and experts. The current representation of Islamic fundamentalism as a portent of democracy has opened another chapter in this cyclical saga of hope and disillusionment. When that chapter comes to be written, it might begin by asking how Islamic fundamentalism, still loathing the West and loathed by it, yet became the hope of democratizers.

FOR most of the 1980's, those who saw Islamic fundamentalism for what it is saw groups as violent and dogmatic as any in the

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world. These were people who mixed nostalgia with grievance to produce a millenarian vision of an Islamic state—a vision so powerful that its pursuit justified any means. Angry believers invoked this Islam when they executed enemies of the revolution in Iran, assassinated a president in Egypt, and detonated themselves or abducted others in Lebanon. Their furious words complemented their deeds. They marched to chants of “Death to America” and intimidated all opponents with charges of espionage and treason. They did not expect to be understood, but they did want to be feared, and feared they were, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Yet their violence failed to overturn the region. While fundamentalists did seize the state in Iran, in most Arab countries they lurked about the edges of politics. They were often dangerous, and always fascinating, but they posed no mortal threat to the established order.

By the decade’s end, however, many of these same groups had managed to transform themselves into populist movements, and even win mass followings. They did so by riding a huge tide of discontent, fed by exploding populations, falling oil prices, and economic mismanagement by the state. While regimes fumbled for solutions, the fundamentalists persuaded the growing numbers of the poor, the young, and the credulous that if they only returned to belief and implemented God’s law, the fog of misery surrounding them would lift.

Islam is the solution, ran the fundamentalist slogan. What that meant, no one would say. The treatises of those billed as first-rate theoreticians seemed vague, by design. Here and there, fundamentalists organized model communities. Although billed as successful experiments in self-reliance, they were actually Potemkin mosques, built and supported with money from oil-rich donors. Fundamentalists also organized Islamic investment banks, which were supposed to prove that market economics could flourish even under the Islamic prohibition of interest. The most extensive experiment in Islamic banking, in Egypt, produced Islamic financial scandal in fairly short order.

But most of the new followers read no theory and lost no money. They stood mesmerized by the rhetorical brilliance of men like the Sudan’s Hasan al-Turabi, Tunisia’s Rashid al-Ghannushi, and Lebanon’s Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. These preachers did not intone musty Islamic polemics against unbelievers. Often they sounded more like the tenured Left, venting professorial condemnations of the West’s sins.

Indeed, many of them issued from the academy. Turabi, schooled at the University of London and the Sorbonne, had been a professor of law and a dean; Ghannushi, a professor of philosophy. They had overheard the West’s self-in-

crimination, uttered in Left Bank cafés and British and American faculty lounges. This they reworked into a double-edged argument for the superiority and inevitability of Islam, buttressed not only by familiar Islamic scripture but by the West’s own doomsday prophets, from Toynbee onward. These wise men of the West had confessed to capital crimes: imperialism, racism, Zionism. If *they* felt the tremors of the coming quake, could Muslims not feel them? Those who listened long enough to words pumped from pulpit amplifiers did indeed begin to feel a slight tremor, and the mosques filled to overflowing.

A great deal of solid scholarship on these movements appeared during the 1980’s, making it difficult to view them benignly. Their theories of *jihad* and conspiracy, embedded in wordy tracts, received critical scrutiny. True, Edward Said, Columbia’s part-time professor of Palestine, presented a contrary view in *Covering Islam*, a book which bemoaned the Western media’s treatment of Islam. The book was much admired by the Islamic Jihad in Beirut, prolific deconstructionists (of U.S. embassies) who circulated it among Western hostages for their edification. But the violence of the fundamentalists made them a difficult sell, and when in 1989 they filled the streets to demand the death of the novelist Salman Rushdie, they bit the hands even of those few Western intellectuals who had tried to feed them. As the decade closed, Islamic fundamentalism could count on few foreign friends.

MEANWHILE, even as Islam’s fundamentalists were demanding the death of Rushdie, a longing for democracy (and capitalism) swept across Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, rulers took fright at the scenes of revolution from Romania and East Germany, and proceeded to initiate tightly controlled experiments in political pluralism. At the time, the architects of these experiments had no sense of the fundamentalists’ appeal; they thought that the openings would work to the benefit of parties advocating liberal reform.

But it was the fundamentalists who led the dash through the newly opened door. The first of a succession of surprises occurred in Egypt’s parliamentary elections in 1987, when a coalition dominated by the fundamentalist Muslim Brethren emerged as the biggest opposition party in a contest gerrymandered to assure victory for the ruling party. The fundamentalists also outdistanced all other opposition parties in the 1989 elections for Tunisia’s parliament, although a winner-take-all system gave every seat to the ruling party. That same year, the fundamentalists nearly captured the lower house of Jordan’s parliament, in that country’s first general election since 1967. Then,

in 1990, the fundamentalists swept the country-wide local elections in Algeria.

Given these successes, almost overnight fundamentalist movements became the most avid and insistent supporters of free elections—an unpatrolled route to the power that had hitherto eluded them. Liberal Arab intellectuals, who had lobbied for democratic reforms and human rights for much of the 1980's, now retreated in disarray, fearful that freer press and elections might play straight into the hands of fundamentalists.

For Western theorists of democracy, it was as if the Arabs had defied the laws of gravity. Few admitted the bind as frankly as Jeane Kirkpatrick, who said:

The Arab world is the only part of the world where I've been shaken in my conviction that if you let the people decide, they will make fundamentally rational decisions.

Most theorists, however, refused to be shaken. In order to synchronize the Arab predicament with the march of democracy, they developed a convenient theory—the theory of initial advantage.

The fundamentalists, according to this theory, enjoyed an advantage in the first stages of democratization: they knew how to organize, to stir emotions, to get out the vote. But “as civil society is enlivened,” announced one political scientist, “it is only natural that the influence of the Islamist groups will be challenged.” Then their appeal would fade, once the people enjoyed a full range of options. In the privacy of the voting booth, the voters would become rational actors, and elect liberals and technocrats who proposed serious answers to the crisis of Arab society.

Algeria's parliamentary election, first scheduled for June 1991 and then postponed until December, was to have proved the point. According to the theorists, Algeria had the best chance of giving birth to a liberal democracy. More than any other Arab country, Algeria enjoyed an intimate connection with Europe, and its elites were at home with the ways of the West. True, the new Algerian voter had already given one sweeping victory to the Islamic Salvation Front (known by its French acronym, FIS) in local elections. But expert opinion declared the FIS victory a “protest” against the corruption of the ruling party, not a vote for a stern regime of Islamic mores. Anyway, ran the argument, the FIS had lost its initial advantage, first by mismanaging the municipalities where it had assumed authority, and then by backing Saddam Hussein in his Kuwait blunder.

“Saddam's defeat has turned the Algerian political situation upside down,” announced *L'Express*, “leaving the FIS in the worst position of all.” It was safely predicted that Algerians would turn away from the sheiks in the upcoming parliamentary elections—a fair and free ballot, struc-

tured in technical consultation with the best Parisian authorities in the *sciences politiques*. “The FIS can now count on only a die-hard bloc of unemployed urban youths,” opined an American political scientist in the *Journal of Democracy*, who found it “unlikely that the FIS will gain enough votes to dictate the makeup of the new government.” Such confident assurances helped to anesthetize Algeria's elite, who secretly worshiped foreign expertise and looked surreptitiously to the foreign press to explain their own predicament to them.

Thus, Paris and Algiers were both astonished when the FIS won a landslide victory in the first round of the parliamentary election, nearly burying Algeria's regime and its Westernized elite. The Sudan's Turabi was right for once when he claimed that any observer with insight should have been able to predict the outcome: “The Western media wished this not to be so, so they hid the facts from everyone, so the results came as a surprise.” But the self-deception went beyond the media, to the battery of democracy doctors who had ministered to the ailing Algerian polity. Their theory of initial advantage proved to be an immense blind spot, large enough to conceal a near-revolution.

ALGERIA confirmed something that has been demonstrated in study after study of fundamentalist movements: fundamentalism is no fad, but the preference of a generation. It will not stop on a dime—on the failure of Saddam's *jihad*, or the scandal surrounding Islamic banks in Egypt, or haphazard garbage collection in fundamentalist-run towns in Algeria. Nor do the fundamentalists now need a detailed plan to alleviate suffering, because they possess potent words, and those words vest suffering with meaning. In a Western polity, the Pied Pipers of the disaffected young could not hope to win power in a landslide vote. But the explosion of the young population in the Arab world has given this generation an immense electoral advantage. After Algeria's parliamentary election, the bleak reality could not be denied: free elections in the Middle East and North Africa were more likely to produce fundamentalist rule than not.

The failure to anticipate the FIS victory should have cut deeply into the credibility of Western democracy doctors, with their blithe promise that the fundamentalist appeal would fade in a truly free ballot. But over the past year they have rebounded with a new discovery. Fundamentalism, they now claim, is destined not to disappear but to triumph, because *it* is the yearning for democracy in Islamic camouflage.

Those who claim credit for this discovery muster three arguments in support of their contention that Islam has become the “Cause of Good,” and that Islamic movements therefore deserve

the sympathy the West has bestowed on democracy movements elsewhere. Paradoxically, each of these arguments has already been systematically refuted—by the fundamentalists themselves.

THE first argument holds that Islamic fundamentalism, whatever its past, has entered upon an evolution, and has already started to reconcile Islam with democratic values. As one academic apologist claims:

Many Islamic activists have “Islamized” parliamentary democracy, asserting an Islamic rationale for it, and appeal to democracy in their opposition to incumbent regimes.

The distortion here does not lie in the claim of compatibility between Islam and democracy. Although the dominant interpretation of Islam has historically sanctioned authoritarian rule, the reinterpretation of Islamic sources, done with enough imagination, could conceivably produce an opposing argument for Islamic democracy. Here and there, intrepid Muslims have searched the divine word of the Qur'an, the traditions of the Prophet, and the early history of Islam in order to establish the democratic essence of Islam, buried deep beneath the chronicles of despotism.

But these are not the Muslims leading the fundamentalist movements now bidding for power. Fundamentalists insist they have not demanded free elections in order to promote democracy or the individual freedoms that underpin it, but to promote Islam. Indeed, when leading fundamentalist thinkers do address the broader question of democracy, it is not to argue its compatibility with Islam but to demonstrate democracy's inferiority to Islamic government. Such a virtuous government, they affirm, can rest only on obedience to the divinely-given law of Islam, the *shari'a*.

A deception lurks in any description of the fundamentalists as being committed to the rule of law, for the *shari'a* is not legislated but revealed law; as such, in the eyes of the fundamentalists it has already achieved perfection, and while it is not above some reinterpretation, neither is it infinitely elastic. If anything, fundamentalist exegesis has rejected reformist attempts to stretch the law much beyond its letter, and has even magnified the differences between Islamic and universal law.

At the heart of these differences reside Islamic law's principled affirmations of inequality, primarily between Muslims and non-Muslims, secondarily between men and women. This has made fundamentalists into the most unyielding critics of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the freedom to choose one's religion and one's spouse. Both freedoms indisputably contradict Islamic law, which defines conversion out of Islam as a capital offense, and for-

bids marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. (In 1981, the leading fundamentalists met in Paris and put out an Islamic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which omitted all freedoms that contradicted the *shari'a*.)

The *shari'a*, as a perfect law, cannot be abrogated or altered, and certainly not by the shifting moods of an electorate. Accordingly, every major fundamentalist thinker has repudiated popular sovereignty as a rebellion against God, the sole legislator. In the changed circumstances of the 1990's, some activists do allow that an election can serve a useful one-time purpose, as a collective referendum of allegiance to Islam, and as an act of submission to a regime of divine justice. But once such a regime gains power, its true measure is not how effectively it implements the will of the people but how efficiently it applies Islamic law.

The ideal of Islamic government most often evoked by the fundamentalists harks back to the notion of a just commander, ruling in consultation with experts in the law. There is a revulsion against the combat of parties and personalities in democratic politics, well expressed by the Sudan's Turabi, fundamentalism's best-known spokesman in the West. In a tract on the Islamic state, Turabi explains that such a state, once established, really has no need of party politics or political campaigns. While Islamic law does not expressly oppose a multiparty system,

this is a form of factionalism that can be very oppressive of individual freedom and divisive of the community, and it is, therefore, antithetical to a Muslim's ultimate responsibility to God.

As for elections:

In Islam, no one is entitled to conduct a campaign for themselves directly or indirectly in the manner of Western electoral campaigns. The presentation of candidates would be entrusted to a neutral institution that would explain to the people the options offered in policies and personalities.

Through this elaborate hedging, Turabi arrives at a tacit legitimization of one-party rule, which is the actual form of government he now justifies and supports in the Sudan.

Of the vast complex of democratic values and institutions offered by the West, the fundamentalists have thus seized upon only one, the free plebiscite, and even that is to be discarded after successful one-time use. They remain ambivalent, if not hostile, to party politics, and they spend much of their intellectual energy arguing that the reckless expansion of freedom can only harm the collective security of Islam. When asked which existing regime most closely approximates an ideal Islamic order, fundamentalists most often

cite the governments of the Sudan or Iran—the first a military regime, the second a hierocracy ruled by an increasingly autocratic cleric, and both first-order violators of human rights.

THE second argument holds that Islamic fundamentalism drives many movements and represents a wide spectrum of views, not all of them extreme. Because of its diversity, the past or present performance of fundamentalism in one setting says nothing about its future performance in another. And this diversity also rules out domino-like progress: the world does not face an Islamintern, but a variety of local movements.

The concept of a diverse fundamentalism has wound its way to Washington, where it achieved full flower in a June 1992 speech by Edward Djerejian, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs:

In countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, we thus see groups or movements seeking to reform their societies in keeping with Islamic ideals. There is considerable diversity in how these ideals are expressed. We detect no monolithic or coordinated international effort behind these movements. What we do see are believers living in different countries placing renewed emphasis on Islamic principles, and governments accommodating Islamist political activity to varying degrees and in different ways.

But this claim for the diversity of fundamentalist movements—again labeled expectantly as movements of reform—is most convincingly countered by the fundamentalists themselves, with their uncanny knack for refuting every Western argument made on their behalf. Turabi put it best, in an interview granted just after the FIS success in the first round of the Algerian parliamentary election. The awakening of Islam, he said, has produced a movement notable for its *uniformity*. If there appear to be differences, that is because “God in His wisdom is varying and distributing the phenomenon to let people know that it is coming everywhere at all times.”

The leading fundamentalists insist that their movement is pan-Islamic as a matter of principle. The borders that separate their countries, drawn up by European imperial fiat, do not bind them morally or limit them politically. And in practice, fundamentalist movements have an irresistible tendency to think and act across borders. Over the past decade, the international traffic among Islamic fundamentalists has grown intense. Fundamentalist leaders jet from conference to conference to open channels that will assure the rapid transmission of ideas and mutual aid. They learn from one another, imitate one another, and assist one another.

The greatest success of their joint efforts has

been the aid they collectively mobilized for the Afghan *mujahideen* during the 1980's—aid that included money, materiel, and thousands of volunteers who fought in the Islamic *jihad* against the Soviet occupation. No less striking has been the success of the Islamic Republic of Iran in implanting the indomitable Hezbollah, a fundamentalist movement faithful to Iran's revolution, on Lebanese soil, where it has waged a largely successful *jihad* against American, French, and Israeli forces.

Thanks to the jet, the cassette, and the fax, pan-Islam is no longer a bogey but a growing reality. Turabi, for example, categorizes Islamic fundamentalism as a “pan-national movement,” and the Sudan's policy reflects it. The Sudan has run Algerian voting data through its computers for the FIS, it has provided diplomatic passports for foreign fundamentalists, and it has brought the foremost fundamentalists to Khartoum to create an Islamic Arab Popular Conference, of which Turabi is secretary. Iran is still more active, not only continuing to finance Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also including a line item in its budget for support of the Palestinian *intifada*—monies which have gone largely to fundamentalists who battle the peace process. Visitors to Khartoum and Teheran, and even to Amman, are astonished at the odd mix of foreign fundamentalists who can be spotted in hotel lobbies and government ministries.

There is, in short, much ado about something, part of which is visible aboveboard in publicized visits and conferences, part of which is arranged in the conspiratorial fashion mastered by the fundamentalists during their long years underground. And so the apologists, preoccupied with imaginary changes in the substance of the fundamentalist message, overlook perhaps the most important transformation of all: the emergence of a global village of Islamic fundamentalism.

ACCORDING to the final argument, fundamentalism, whatever the dangers it might pose to freedoms or borders, still poses no real threat to Western interests or to the stability of a new world order. The fundamentalists' goals cannot be achieved in defiance of the West. States which have sold oil to the West will still sell it; states which have needed Western aid will still need it. Once in power, promises another Western apologist, fundamentalists will

generally operate on the basis of national interests and demonstrate a flexibility that reflects acceptance of the realities of a globally interdependent world.

But where their apologists see an interdependent world, the fundamentalists themselves see a starkly divided world. During the Gulf crisis, they championed the view that any partnership be-

tween believers and nonbelievers constituted a violation of divine order. Therefore, while Saddam may have done wrong when he invaded Kuwait, King Fahd, who depended on "American 'Crusaders'" to defend Saudi Arabia, most certainly sinned. Ma'mun al-Hudaybi, official spokesman of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, announced that "Islamic law does not permit any enlisting of assistance from polytheists [*mushrikun*]." According to Rashid al-Ghannushi, the exiled leader of the Tunisian fundamentalist movement, Saudi Arabia had committed a colossal crime. Of Saddam, no friend of Islam before the crisis, he said:

We are not worshiping personalities, but anyone who confronts the enemies of Islam is my friend and anyone who puts himself in the service of the enemies of Islam is my enemy.

For fundamentalists, the identity of the enemy has remained constant since Islam first confronted unbelief. In *their* vision of interdependence, Islam will indeed sell its oil, provided that it is allowed to invest the proceeds in instruments of war which will enable Muslims to deter any form of Western intervention. This proliferation will eventually create a world order based not on American hegemony but on a restored balance of power—and terror. As Hezbollah's mentor, Fadlallah, says in a transparent reference to military might and the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons:

We may not have the actual power the U.S. has, but we had the power previously and we have now the foundations to develop that power in the future.

THIS restored balance between Islam and the West excludes the intrusive existence of Israel in the lands of Islam. Unlike several Arab regimes and some elements of the PLO, which have grudgingly accepted the reality of the Jewish state, the fundamentalists remain uncompromisingly theological in their understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestine is a land sacred to Islam, a land stolen by the Jews. Not an inch may be alienated. Israel is a cancer in the Islamic world, implanted by imperialism and nurtured by the U.S. The Jewish state has to be fought, passively through nonrecognition, actively through *jihad*. This view is shared by fundamentalists of all stripes, from the many Sunni movements in the Muslim Brethren tradition to the Shiite movements that receive guidance and support from Iran.

The opening of direct talks among Israel, the Palestinians, and other Arab states has revealed how tenaciously the fundamentalists adhere to their rejection of any negotiated accommodation. Said the Hezbollah leader Abbas al-Musawi on the eve of the 1991 Madrid conference:

We are the major nation in this region, whereas the Jews are an alien and temporary entity. It is our judgment that the Jews should leave the region.

This might have been taken for an extreme position had not so many Western commentators labeled Musawi a moderate upon his assassination by Israel a few months later.

A few fundamentalists have allowed that the simple elimination of the state of Israel, without the expulsion of the Jews living there, would satisfy the precepts of Islam. As Turabi told a Washington audience last May:

Islamists think that principles have to be observed. That is not to say that the Jews have to be thrown out, but they [the Islamists] think that the Palestinians are entitled to their land.

That land, according to Turabi, includes all of Palestine, and he avers that he cannot accept recognition of Israel under any terms. Indeed, on his return to Khartoum, a troubled Turabi warned the visiting PLO chairman Yasir Arafat that some Arab states were plotting against the Palestinian cause, and were "befriending Israel in much the same way they did in the days of the Crusaders." The Crusader analogy, having been pressed into service to explain the American deployment of troops in Saudi Arabia, has now returned to regular duty as the fundamentalist frame of reference for Israel's "usurpation" of Palestine.

As the peace talks have proceeded, Islam's fundamentalists have begun to mold Muslim opinion in favor of a resumption of the *jihad* for Palestine. Ibrahim Ghawsha, speaking for Hamas, the largest Palestinian fundamentalist movement, has drawn analogies that go beyond the usual parallel of Israel and the Crusaders:

We think the conflict between the Arabs and Jews, between the Muslims and the Jews, is a cultural conflict that will continue to rage throughout all time. . . . Algeria fought for 130 years. Even the Baltic states, which were occupied by the Soviets, have had their independence recognized by world states 45 years after they were occupied. The Palestine question is only [about] 40 years old, considering that it came into being in 1948. We are at the beginning of the road. Our adversary needs to be dealt with through a protracted and continuous confrontation.

An escalation of fundamentalist violence has indeed met every sign of progress in the talks. Jordanian fundamentalists have tried to penetrate Israel's border with Jordan. Palestinian fundamentalists from Hamas and the several branches of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have launched knifing and gun attacks against Israelis. And Hezbollah has stepped up attacks against Israel's security zone in south Lebanon, and even sent rockets into northern Israel. Their ascending vio-

lence may not have stalled the peace talks, but the fundamentalists hope that if they can draw enough blood, it will strengthen their argument that the Zionist entity does not constitute an irreversible fact, and that steadfastness in battle will deliver all of Palestine to Islam.

For movements that have supposedly forsaken the violence of *jihad*, it is remarkable how persistently and passionately they invoke it against "Crusaders" and Jews alike.

DEMOCRACY, diversity, accommodation—the fundamentalists have repudiated them all. In appealing to the masses who fill their mosques, they promise, instead, to institute a regime of Islamic law, make common cause with like-minded "brethren" everywhere, and struggle against the hegemony of the West and the existence of Israel. Fundamentalists have held to these principles through long periods of oppression, and will not abandon them now, at the moment of their greatest popular resonance.

These principles bear no resemblance to the ideals of Europe's democracy movements; if anything, they evoke more readily the atavism of Europe's burgeoning nationalist Right. The refusal to see Islamic fundamentalism in this context, or to take seriously the discourse of the Islamists, is evidence of the persistent power of the West to create a wholly imaginary Islam. In this instance, the myth of fundamentalism as a movement of democratic reform assures the West that no society on earth has the moral resources to challenge the supremacy of Western values: even Islam's fundamentalists, cursing the ways of foreigners, will end up embracing them. This is a reassuring gospel, but it necessarily ignores Islam as it is actually believed and practiced by the fundamentalists, and this denial has sowed the seeds of future disillusionment.

As for the fundamentalists themselves, they and their apologists warn against the futility of resisting the fundamentalist surge. "Islam is a new force that is going to come anyway, because it's a wave of history," Turabi assures his Western listeners, and "superficial obstacles will certainly not stand in the way." In fact, fundamentalism will triumph no matter what the West does, because it "thrives" on repression.

But does it, after all? The regime and elite of Algeria (like those of Iraq) still rule despite predictions of their inevitable collapse, and seem to draw on unexpectedly deep reservoirs of resolve. In Tunisia and Egypt, too, governments have taken a page from the Algerian book and instituted stiff measures against their own fundamentalist oppositions. Movements which grew more vocal and violent as the Algerian fundamentalists marched toward power have lost their confidence now that the FIS leaders have been marched off to prison.

Contrary to Turabi's claim, then, the fundamentalists have not thrived on repression. While the support for these movements is broad, it is not uniformly deep. A fundamentalist movement, when faced with the massive force of the state, can also be broken, following the precedent of the Syrian movement whose leaders were killed, jailed, and exiled by a determined regime in early 1982. Syria's Islamic opposition has not been heard from since, and its fate stands as a grim reminder to the fundamentalists of the price a movement may pay if it relies on divine protection alone.

THE present stage in the strategy of the fundamentalists is therefore charged with irony. As governments crack down on fundamentalist movements, their apologists and even their leaders have taken to pleading more vociferously for the *deus ex machina* of American intervention. The same fundamentalists who condemned Saudi Arabia's enlisting of assistance from "polytheists" would enlist some of it themselves, if they could. Their approach has been to tug at the conscience of the Western democracies. In particular, they ask that the United States intervene to protect the rights of free speech and assembly so precious to the West, and press for free elections throughout the region. "I am trying to tell my audiences that the values which are dear to them are also common to Islam," said a disingenuous Turabi in Washington, especially citing "free government based on consultation and participation."

Until now, the fundamentalists have offered nothing in exchange for this protection. In his policy speech on Islam last June, Assistant Secretary Edward Djerejian expressed suspicion

of those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to destroy that very process in order to retain power and political dominance.

Yet the speech left open the possibility of an accommodation if fundamentalists ceased to be "extreme," and so demonstrated that fundamentalism's apologists had won acceptance of their most essential point: fundamentalism is a movement of "reform," itself susceptible of reform. With Djerejian's speech, the United States moved, in Blunt's formulation, "to take Islam by the hand and encourage her boldly in the path of virtue."

If those hands are joined, the overture to fundamentalism promises to be the riskiest policy venture of the next decade in the Middle East and North Africa. According to one academic analyst,

The 21st century will test the ability of political analysts and policy-makers to distinguish be-

tween Islamic movements that are a threat and those that represent legitimate indigenous attempts to reform and redirect their societies.

Would that these movements could be divided into two such broadly opposed categories. But every movement combines threat and "reform" in a seamless message, and much of the supposed reform is threatening as well—to women, minorities, and the occasional novelist who would write a book on Islam. Which of these movements could be trusted with power, and which would betray that trust at the first opportunity? No one can possibly know, because the threat that resides in fundamentalism is anchored to its foundations, and is liable to resurface at critical moments when the peace and stability of the region hang in the balance.

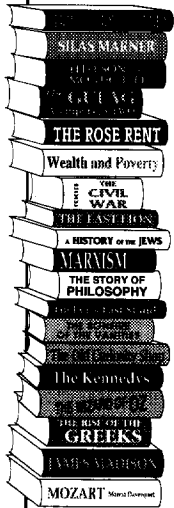
Political pluralism and peace do have true friends in the Middle East and North Africa. They are beleaguered and dazed by the generational surge of Islamic fundamentalism, and they are divided over the fate of Algeria and its implications. Some have been ridiculed by the democracy theorists as self-styled liberals, guilty of peddling the view that existing governments are pref-

erable to the anointed fundamentalists. But their forebodings are as justified as those of Westerners who shudder at the rise of their own extreme Right, and they remain democracy's only hope in the Arab world. In partnership with gradually liberalizing regimes they might just muddle through—provided they are not sacrificed on the altar of a bankrupt paradigm.

When Wilfrid Blunt published *The Future of Islam* in 1882, that future seemed to belong to the Mahdists, the zealots of the day, who within a few years took Khartoum, seized Western hostages, and threatened all of Islam with revolution. But by the century's close, Mahdism in the Sudan had been contained and finally destroyed, and a French observer could write that "Islam today is vanquished, its political decadence . . . inevitable." The demise of present-day Islamic fundamentalism is no more inevitable than its triumph. But this movement too could well be spent by the end of this century, especially if it is not abetted by a misguided reprise of the Carter administration's policy toward Iran—a policy which, in the name of human rights, first inaugurated the era of the ayatollahs.



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cracies to regulate every facet of making a living, as well as of dealing with the most basic personal needs—and then making them the servants of unelected interests. Why did Europeans wait until the 1990's to discover that powers are being exercised over them for which there is no specific constitutional warrant? And why are so many complaints directed at the still largely theoretical threat of the Maastricht treaty?

The answer lies in the concept of sovereignty. Its early theorists were very clear: sovereignty is power without inherent limit, power to do anything not naturally impossible. Subjects under the sovereign power of Leviathan feared it. Then nationalism, compounded by democracy, invited people to confuse themselves with their country and to imagine that all were equally sovereign, and that government officials were public servants. Theorists of the modern welfare state, including the governor of New York, even tout it as an extended family to which everyone belongs equally. But government officials are not public servants, much less fathers of their peoples. They are sovereigns who dispose of half one's earnings. Nowadays the shortest route to wealth is a set of good contacts with a government agency, which means membership in one of the government's countless advisory committees.

Cornelia Mrose is upset that in the name of Germany the German government is giving up powers to Brussels. But in the name of Germany the government is also taxing all to dispense billions in the East. The accountability of the German bureaucrats who are making the wealth of some and the poverty of others is only theoretical—or rather fictional. The European Community's loveliest aspect is that it does the same things that national governments do, but without fig leaves.

### Islam & the PLO

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I am happy to find, at last, an article that alerts us to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, Martin Kramer's "Islam vs. Democracy" [January].

As Bernard Lewis has pointed out in his book, *The Political Language of Islam*, central to Islam is *jihad*, which enjoins Muslims to expand the borders of Is-

lam. While Muslim apologists attempt to explain this away as a spiritual concept, Lewis informs us that the "overwhelming majority of classical theologians, jurists, and traditionalists . . . understood the obligation of *jihad* in a military sense, and have examined and expounded it accordingly." This makes the Islamic world tend to behave like an engulfing amoeba, an organism with a built-in formula for expansion and control that will continue on its way until it runs up against firm resistance. . . .

Unfortunately, the conduct of some Israeli politicians and some Western democracies suggests strongly to the Muslims that Israel can be whittled down and undone. The Islamic plan is clearly to gain Israeli-held territory here and there, as trades for "peace," until Israel loses strategic depth and becomes burdened with a burgeoning Arab population on both sides of the "green line," from which a never-ending supply of terrorists can be drawn, a situation that existed with the fedayeen in Gaza before the 1956 war.

This vulnerable condition would provide an irresistible spur to Islam to continue the conflict in its many forms. . . . The *only* way Islam can be made to desist from engaging in *jihad* is to encounter unyielding resistance. It would be wise, then, for Israel and its Western allies to put up such resistance.

But from reading Mr. Kramer's article, I think I note a slight chink in the armor through which an Islamic Trojan Horse could penetrate the Israeli wall, namely, the PLO. Mr. Kramer excludes from the circle of Islamic fundamentalists "some elements of the PLO," which, he suggests, "have grudgingly accepted the reality of the Jewish state." In this I believe he is mistaken.

I say this because the PLO is the Islamic world's weapon to enlist secular forces against Israel. The goal of the PLO is the same as that of Hamas and other fundamentalists: the total destruction of Israel. The two groups merely constitute different ways to achieve this goal. Look at what the existence of the so-called "secular" PLO accomplishes for Islam:

1. It disguises *jihad* and enables it to appear in secular form. . . .

2. It promotes the illusion that an accommodation with the Palestinian Arabs along secular lines is possible. If it were known that the

conflict is a religious one and that no compromise is possible, Muslims might lose world support. . . .

3. A "secular" PLO enables Christian sects hostile to Israel to get into the act without having openly to support the aims of another religion.

. . . It is time to wake up and expose the farce of PLO secularism before it is too late.

DAVID BASCH  
West Hartford, Connecticut

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Martin Kramer's benign conclusion that, perhaps—just perhaps—the fundamentalism overtaking the Islamic world will somehow fade away, seems to belie the body of his careful analysis that it will not. . . .

Though we have before us the example of the sudden liberalizing and liberating of the former Soviet empire, which took almost everyone by surprise, we also have the much more common examples of revolutions which have led to more autocratic states.

As Mr. Kramer implies—who knows? But since there isn't any Islamic Gorbachev or de Klerk on

the scene, it's probably best to keep our powder dry.

FREDERIC WILE

New York City

MARTIN KRAMER writes:

I am perplexed by David Basch's argument that the PLO should be situated in the circle of Islamic fundamentalism. The PLO is of the same vintage as Algeria's FLN, and now faces a similar challenge by a fundamentalist opposition: the media darlings of Hamas. The PLO may not be secular by Western standards, but it is by the increasingly Islamized standards of the contemporary Middle East. The countless defectors to Hamas do not regard the PLO's secularism as a farce. Nor do they regard the PLO's policy of sending a Christian woman to concede most of Islamic Palestine to the Jews as a clever "Islamic plan." On the contrary, they are certain the Jews will rout the Palestinian delegation and the Arab states in Washington.

This is because any "peace" with Israel would necessarily involve some sort of "normalization." According to the fundamentalists, the Jews would give up insignifi-

cant territory in order to put the entire region under a cultural and economic occupation. Israeli hegemony would then extend from the Nile to the Euphrates. The actual "Islamic plan," then, is the opposite of that suggested by Mr. Basch: it is predicated on unyielding struggle, and absolute rejection of the PLO's decision to negotiate.

As for the PLO, it does include some who see the peace process as war (even *jihad*) by other means. If I wrote that some elements of the PLO accept the reality of Israel, then clearly some elements do not. If I wrote that the spirit of that acceptance has been grudging, then obviously it is fragile. And acceptance of the reality of Israel is far from recognition of its legitimacy. Still, Israel's proven strength has brought its enemies to the table. Provided Israel emerges from the present negotiations even stronger, there is every chance that this acceptance will grow. Obviously the elements which constitute Israeli strength are a matter for debate. But I trust Mr. Basch will agree that this issue should be decided by the people and government of Israel.

I apologize to Frederic Wile for drawing too subtle a conclusion. Let me be explicit. I did not argue that Islamic fundamentalism will "somehow fade away." But I did deny the fundamentalists' own claim that their triumph is inevitable. Fundamentalism can be contained provided the West supports the friends of stability and pluralism in Muslim lands. And while I dismissed the view that Islamic fundamentalism is a fad, I did describe it as a generational surge, borne on the shoulders of the disaffected young. The surge will subside in time, unless soft thinking allows it to acquire power, as in Iran. In that case, both the West and the unfortunate peoples of the region will be saddled with it for generations to come.

Since publication of my article, it has transpired that U.S. embassies in the Middle East conducted a dialogue with several fundamentalist movements, including Hamas. The U.S. supposedly wished to be better informed. But the very conduct of dialogue needlessly rewarded the fundamentalists, who continued and even accelerated their incitement of violence against U.S. policy. It raised doubts about American judgment

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among friends and allies. And it suggested that the U.S. has insufficient independent sources of information about these movements. As usual, the real danger is not that our powder might get wet. It is that we ourselves might recklessly ignite it.

### Poetry as Sanctuary

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Thank you for Christopher Clausen's review of *Can Poetry Matter?* by Dana Gioia [Books in Review, February].

It is true, as Mr. Clausen notes, that most contemporary poetry is written for, and about, other poets. It is also true that poetry "grows out of a narrower range of experience than in the past," namely, the life that revolves around creative-writing courses in English departments.

But why must this situation always be lamented? Poetry will never again have the same role that it held before the novel, movies, and TV. But it has developed into a forum, a sanctuary if you will, for pursuing a kind of aesthetic and spiritual self-help, and, in its workshop form, group therapy. . . .

Why is it assumed that poets really *want* to reach a wider audience? It is the subculture that provides their livelihood, their companions and muses. It is not in their best interest to address the general public; the point is to preserve the secret language of the enclave. Poets seek only one another, a network of contemplatives offering an alternative world. This is not necessarily bad; it is simply the result of a natural process of evolution. Why not accept it as such?

KAREN WHITEHILL  
Charlottesville, Virginia

### The Voice of NPR

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Andrea Levin's "The Voice of NPR" [Israel Watch, January] is a masterpiece of reporting based on meticulous research. Her comments are congruent with my own observations. . . . Listening to National Public Radio [NPR] while driving, . . . I inevitably become enraged by its derogatory reporting about Israel and its anti-Israel slant concerning events in the Middle East. It is a miracle that

there have been no automobile accidents as a result of my reactions to these broadcasts.

I have tried calling NPR to talk to individual reporters and even to higher-ups, but . . . I was never even given the courtesy of a return phone call. . . .

I have also called two popular NPR programs, *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*, even though I knew my calls would never be aired. I wrote to both programs on several occasions and never received an answer. . . .

I think the personnel at NPR are not in the least embarrassed by their lack of professional integrity, nor do they care about the public that is helping to support them. . . . I see no reason why such unmitigated and unabashed hatred should be permitted to continue with public funds.

SHELDON F. GOTTLIEB  
Mobile, Alabama

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I am always perplexed at the hostile attitude of the liberal establishment toward the sole outpost of democracy in the Middle East. Andrea Levin's lucid, dispassionate presentation documents one facet of this hostility, although she has not undertaken an analysis of underlying motives.

Equally perplexing is the attitude of the Jewish community. My local (Philadelphia) public-broadcasting station, WHYY, offers programs of Jewish interest at fund-raising time. . . . Throughout the remainder of the year, however, WHYY faithfully airs NPR programming and refuses to accept any responsibility for the anti-Israel content of these shows; in fact, WHYY regularly manages to present some anti-Israel gems of its own. Several of my efforts to bring this issue to the attention of local Jewish activist organizations have met with indifference. More appalling, ads have been run on WHYY by the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia supporting the station's fund-raising campaign.

Why does the Jewish community accept this continuing, damaging hostility so passively?

JONAS BRACHFELD  
Moorestown, New Jersey

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

. . . The response of National Public Radio to CAMERA's protest about its Middle East coverage was "to concede only that it had made

a few minor factual errors." But what about NPR's misuse of "facts" and its omission of information favorable to Israel or unfavorable to its adversaries?

Mrs. Levin cites NPR's statutory mandate of "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of a controversial nature." News programs should not in fact be "controversial," but NPR's biased programming has made them so.

Mrs. Levin characterizes NPR as "America's prime tax-supported radio network." . . . Unless there is a good prospect for effective oversight of NPR's exercise of its mandate, government contributions should cease. At present the name "National Public Radio" gives the impression that it is complying with its mandate.

SUE GOLDEN LERNER  
Jerusalem, Israel

ANDREA LEVIN writes:

Sheldon F. Gottlieb's frustrated effort to communicate to NPR officials his dissatisfaction with the network's programming is mirrored in the experiences of many. Recent statements by NPR president Douglas Bennet indicate a seemingly disdainful attitude toward the public and an openly defiant approach to measures aimed at bringing the network into compliance with its legal mandate to provide "strict adherence to objectivity and balance" in controversial programming. Bennet denounced important new reform proposals by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting [CPB], the entity that oversees and channels funds to public networks. Commenting on the new CPB measures designed to assess citizen views about network programming, to review such programming for objectivity and balance, and to initiate redress where necessary, Bennet said: "NPR will not run remedial programming and will not respond to editorial judgments other than our own." Bennet averred that program review would have a "chilling effect" on producers and is "a highly sensitive issue of fundamental First Amendment importance."

As we have seen all too often, news outlets which have enormous power to determine the content of information reaching the American public, but which are accountable to no one, like to cast public demands for fuller, more respon-